

Literature Circle Guide to *The Teacher's Funeral*:
A Comedy in Three Parts by Richard Peck

Book Summary

“If your teacher has to die, August isn’t a bad time of year for it,” begins Richard Peck’s latest novel, full of his signature wit and sass. Russell Culver is fifteen in 1904, and he’s raring to leave his tiny Indiana farm town for the endless sky of the Dakotas. To him, school has been nothing but a chain holding him back from his dreams. Maybe now that his teacher has passed on, they’ll shut the school down entirely and leave him free to roam. No such luck. Russell has a particularly eventful year of schooling ahead of him, led by a teacher he never could have predicted—perhaps the only teacher equipped to control the likes of him—his sister Tansy. Despite stolen supplies, a privy fire, and more than any classroom’s share of snakes, Tansy will manage to keep the school alive and maybe, just maybe, set her brother on a new, wiser course.

Author Information

Richard Peck is the first children’s writer to have been awarded a National Humanities Medal. The author of thirty novels, he has also won the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in young-adult literature, the Newbery Medal (for *A Year Down Yonder*), a Newbery Honor (for *A Long Way from Chicago*), and numerous other awards and honors. His most recent book, *Fair Weather*, was included on more than a dozen best-of-the-year lists. In addition to being a writer for young people, Richard Peck has also been an English teacher and a soldier stationed in Stuttgart, Germany. Mr. Peck lives in New York City.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Where do Russell and his family live? In which year do the events of the story take place?

Russell and his family live in Sycamore Township, in Parke County, Indiana. The events in the story take place in 1904.

2. What object does Russell describe as “the only really perfect thing in the world”?

On page 137, Russell uses this phrase to describe the baseball given to his school by the Overland Automobile Company.

3. What does Tansy do at the funeral that astonishes those around her?

On page 45, Russell watches at the funeral as Tansy reaches into the coffin and takes the pointer from Miss Myrt’s clenched hands.

4. Why does Glenn Tarbox move away from his family on Stony Lonesome Road to live with Aunt Fanny Hamline?

On page 168, Glenn tells Russell, “I won’t live out home no more. My brothers were on me day and night about quittin’ school. They don’t want me gittin’ ahead of them. They’ll do anything to keep me down.”

5. What is the Case Special and why do the men and boys of Sycamore Township rush to see it every year?

The Case Special is the train that runs through town once a year by the J.I. Case Company of Racine, Wisconsin. The Case Special carries the latest steam engines and threshing machines. The train arrives with great fanfare, including a calliope,

a man on stilts dressed as Uncle Sam, and the Gold Dust Twins, who pass out scouring pads. Answers should indicate an understanding that, to residents of rural Indiana in 1904, the appearance of the train and the new technology it carried were rare sources of excitement.

6. Imagine you are a new student at Hominy Ridge School and you have just met your new classmates: Russell, Lloyd, Flopears, Lester, Charlie, Glenn, Little Britches, and Pearl. Based on your first impression, which classmate do you think you would most like to have as a friend?

Along with Russell, Charlie and Glenn are the two older boys. Charlie is very tall; Glenn is very muscular. Both are shown as sometimes helpful and sometimes hotheaded. Little Britches, the youngest, might be described as precocious. Ultimately, she is characterized as a good speller. Pearl is eleven. Charlie and Russell notice how she has grown physically over the summer. In class, she initially challenges Tansy's authority before showing a willingness to help around the schoolhouse. Lester is the smallest boy and an avid reader. Flopears is named for his ears. He is later discovered to be a talented artist. Because the answer is based on first impressions and not necessarily on a complete sense of the character, answers should be judged primarily on creativity.

7. Use evidence from the story to show how Russell's actions led to the fire at the schoolhouse. Do you think Tansy is right to accuse him of setting the fire on purpose? **Russell's actions lead to the fire in three ways: First, Russell wraps a sheet around the school's bell, which makes it impossible to summon help when the fire begins to burn; second, he is neglectful in his chore to cut the tall grass around the privy; third, he and Charlie leave the smoldering remains of a buggy whip they had been smoking in the grass. Russell knows his negligence led to the fire and expresses remorse for his actions. However, while he does intentionally cover the bell in an effort to hinder the start of school, there is no evidence in the text to suggest that he did so as a part of a plan to burn down the school. Readers who feel that Tansy is right to accuse Russell of setting the fire should note that they have taken the perspective of someone—like Tansy—who does not have the benefit of knowing Russell's thoughts.**

8. After Russell realizes that Tansy has been chosen as the new schoolteacher, he says, "All those evil omens had led to this." Identify one omen that Russell feels has led to Tansy becoming the new schoolteacher. Why do you think Russell believes this omen was a sign of things to come?

The three omens are the snake in the chicken house (p. 32), the collision with Eugene Hammond (p. 43), and the removal of the pointer from Miss Myrt's hand by Tansy. Russell probably refers to these events as omens because they constitute a trend of bad luck. While the incidents with the snake and the automobile do not prophesize Tansy becoming a teacher in any particular way, the incident at the funeral symbolizes the transfer of power from Miss Myrt to her successor.

9. On page 11, Russell says, "The twentieth century had found us at last, even here." What do you think he means by this? Hint: Your answer should mention at least one invention that is modern to the characters in the story.

Readers should pick up on the importance of both parts of the sentence. First, the comment that the twentieth century has found Parke County is a reference to the steel threshers carried by the Case Special. It also foreshadows things to come in the book, like the automobile and the Edison Victrola. The second part of the sentence is important because it underscores how rural areas like Parke County trailed other communities in access to modern infrastructure and technology. Time

and place relative to the city and the future are important themes in the book; look for answers that indicate the reader understands this.

10. As you were reading the story, who did you suspect might be the Sweet Singer? Were you correct? Look back at the poems in the story and choose a passage from one of the poems that you think points to the identity of the Sweet Singer. Using details from the text, explain why you feel this passage could be a hint.

In the first poem (p. 43), one line reads, “We trusted her with our young ’uns.” Even though Maud had no children, this comment seems unlikely to come from a child. In the second poem (p. 113), the Sweet Singer writes about the “auto accident.” Although details of the accident appeared in the newspaper, the author of the poem seems to have first-hand knowledge of the accident. The third poem (p. 149) contains the distinctly adult comment, “and at last the kids is off our hands.” In the fourth poem (p. 188), the author references her old cob pipe. Careful readers should thus be tipped off that the author is none other than Maud.

11. On page 160, Russell says, “But handing Tansy off to Eugene Hammond didn’t sit right with me.” In your opinion, what does Eugene represent to Russell? Why is Russell unsure about his feelings regarding Eugene?

In his thoughts preceding this comment, Russell wonders why he is ambivalent about Tansy marrying Eugene. After all, he reasons, it will get Tansy off the farm and out of the schoolhouse, since married women are not allowed to be teachers. In a subsequent conversation with his father, Russell expresses his desire that Tansy choose Charlie instead. To Russell, Eugene Hammond is an outsider to a tight-knit community. Eugene represents not only the city (even though he is from a small town originally) but also the future. And while Russell is excited by the future and appreciates the gifts from the Overland Automobile Company, it stands to reason that big cities and the future might be a source of some anxiety for a boy from a small town. Finally, though he does not admit it—out loud or to himself—part of Russell is probably afraid to lose Tansy because it means he has to be the only sibling role model for Lloyd. In that sense, Eugene simply represents someone who could take Tansy away from the family.

12. At the beginning of the story, Russell says he dreams of going to the Dakotas to be on a threshing crew. However, in the end, he decides not to leave. Choose one character who influences Russell’s decision to stay on his family farm and explain what this character does to change Russell’s mind.

The first character to influence Russell is Charlie, who was also supposed to go to the Dakotas. On page 141, Charlie breaks his hand in a fistfight with Glenn. Although he does not purposely break his hand to prevent Russell from leaving, it is still an important factor. On page 144, Mr. Culver takes Charlie on a ride through a seedy area near the train tracks—right where Russell and Charlie would have gone had the trip not been aborted after the fight. Even though this scene with his father occurs after Russell makes his decision, seeing the destitution of the men by the rail yard surely has an impact on Russell. Finally, on page 187, Tansy speaks to Russell about being a role model to Lloyd. While this is not directly in reference to the Dakotas, readers can make a valid argument that such a conversation may also affect Russell’s decision to stay for the time being.

13. Compare and contrast Hominy Ridge School with your own school. Describe at least one difference and one similarity. Do you think you would enjoy being a student in Tansy’s classroom? Use details from the story in your answer.

Likely differences between Hominy Ridge School and any modern school include the wide range of ages in a single room; the fact that students are allowed to hunt

rabbits during lunch; and the fact that the bathroom is an outhouse. Similarities might include the subjects (spelling, geography, fractions, etc.) and the fact that a teacher is evaluated and certified by the county. As a teacher, Tansy could be described as demanding and firm but caring. She establishes authority by staring down Pearl early on, and convinces Little Britches to stay in school by asking her to be the assistant. Whether readers feel turned off by Tansy's no-nonsense teaching, or impressed by her ability to help her students learn, answers should mention at least one detail from the text.

14. On page 143, Russell says about Lloyd, "I never had thought he looked up to me like he should." In your opinion, should Lloyd have looked up to Russell? Why or why not? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your argument.

This question is largely subjective to each reader's opinion of Russell. Some may think Russell is worth looking up to because he goes to school (if reluctantly), treats his friends well, and does his share around the farm. Others may feel Russell should not have tricked Lloyd on their camping trip, or cite Russell's actions prior to the fire as reasons not to look up to him. Look for answers that reference Tansy's comment to Russell on page 187: "It's time you set some kind of example for Lloyd. It's high time you stopped being a little brother to me and started being a big brother to him. He'd look up to you if there was anything to look up to." This criticism from Tansy is harsh and arguably undue, but if at all true it suggests Russell needs to mature before he can be accurately described as someone to look up to. Readers will find plenty of evidence to back either argument.

15. At the very end of the story, Russell describes what happens to some of the characters later in life. Did you enjoy reading about these characters as adults? Why do you think the author chose to include these updates? Choose one character who turned out differently than you thought he or she might and explain what you thought was going to happen to this person.

According to Russell, he and Lloyd eventually moved to Indianapolis to "seek our fortunes." Flopears moved to Indianapolis, too, and became a cartoonist. Lester became the president of Indiana University. Additionally, Russell married Little Britches, Glenn married Tansy, and Charlie married Pearl.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15

Activities

1. On a blank sheet of paper, make a list of Russell's spelling words. See how many other words you can make from each spelling word. Give yourself extra points for words that connect to the story.

The spelling words from the story include but are not limited to *cowered*, *menagerie*, *derision*, *ascend*, and *asphyxiate*.

2. On the day Mr. Whipple and Mr. Owen come to evaluate Tansy, the rest of the class learns that Flopears has been sketching scenes from their school year in his notebook. Choose one event or person from the story and create a sketch like the ones in Flopears's notebook.

The description of the notebook and its contents appear on pages 183-184.

3. Imagine you are Russell or Tansy and several years have passed since the end of the story. Write a letter to your father describing your life in Indianapolis. How is the big city different from Sycamore Township? What do you miss about home? Be sure to mention your new wife, Beulah, or your new husband, Glenn!

Other Books by This Author:

A Long Way from Chicago, Puffin (October 2000)

A Year Down Yonder, Puffin (October 2002)

Fair Weather, Puffin (March 2003)